No. 4

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF
WRONGED WOMANHOOD

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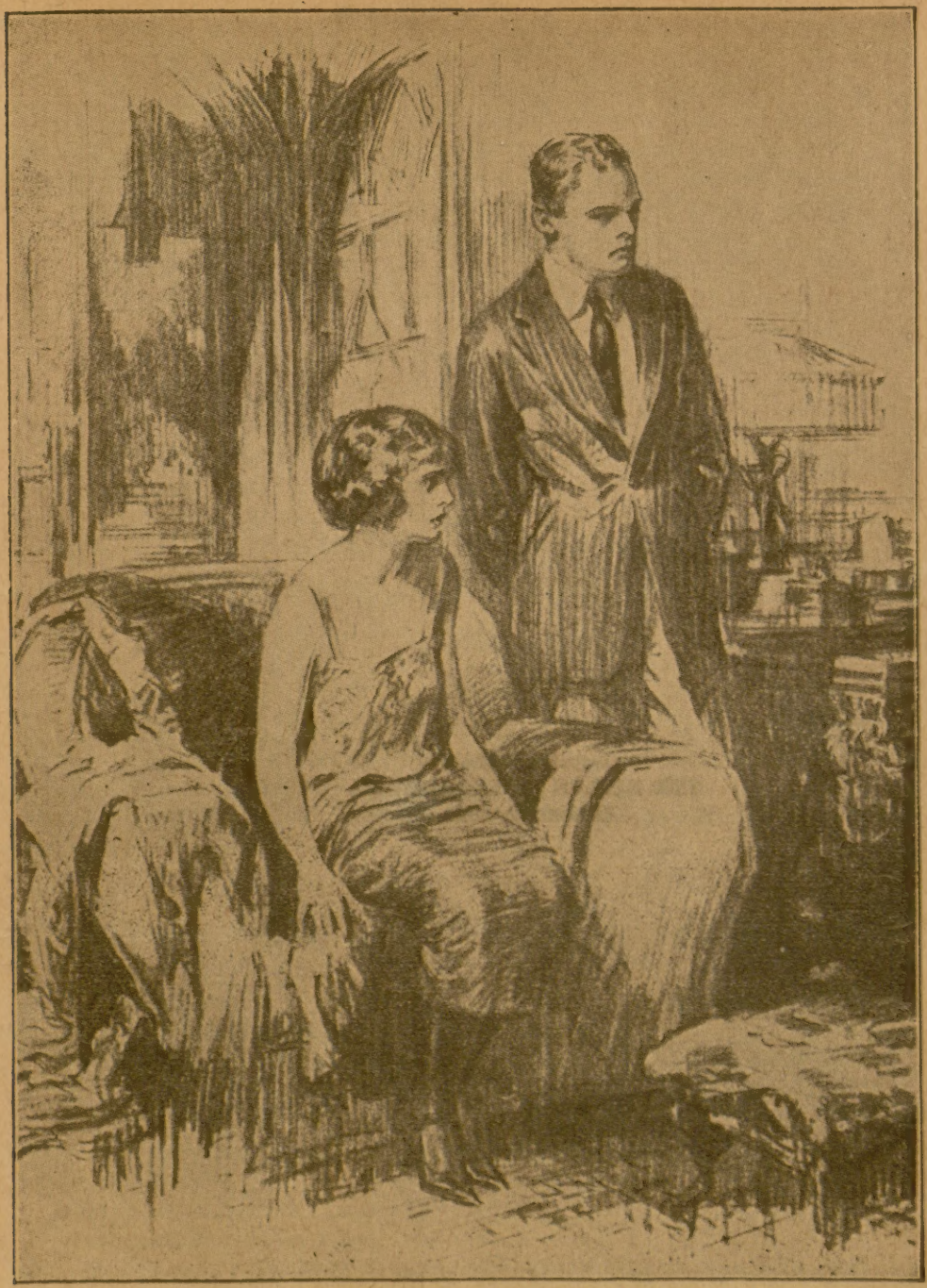

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R. of M. G., No. 4.

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Cincinnati, Ohio.

ONLY TOO WELL did Marie Gordon recall certain incidents of the past which came back to her vividly. They were incidents now fraught with sinister meaning. Her trustful nature had received a rude shock, for the situation involving her husband and Alice Procter was becoming more and more intolerable. She had come to the conclusion that these two would bear watching in the future.

There was, however, a third person who took more than ordinary interest in all matters involving Philip Gordon. This person was his younger sister Ruth.

Only a few of Gordon's most intimate friends knew the tragic story concerning his pretty sister. The end was an unbalanced mind which caused Ruth to be confined in a private sanitarium. More of this will be told in a later chapter.

In the darkest hour of her young life, Ruth had found a loyal and smypathetic supporter in her sister-in-law. Marie had fought Ruth's battle even against Philip.

It was Marie who defended the unfortunate young girl against her brother's wrath. It was Marie who shielded her against calumny. And it was Marie who persuaded Phil to allow Ruth to come home as soon as they were settled at Oak Manor.

Phil had given his consent grudgingly, but insisted that Ruth must remain in retirement, which meant the seclusion of her room. He also forbid her to mingle with the guests on the night of the party.

Again Phil succumbed to the combined pleading of his wife and sister. Ruth was permitted to watch the dancing and hear the music through the tall French windows which separated the drawing room from the wide veranda. And it was here she sat in moody silence when her brother appeared with Alice Procter leaning heavily upon his arm.

Miss Procter was no stranger to Ruth. They had met when the former had hopes of becoming Mrs. Philip Gordon. The dislike had been mutual.

As Ruth watched the couple vanish in the darkness, she instantly scented mischief on Alice Procter's part. She followed them like a shadow in the direction of the pavillion which stood in the spacious garden under a sheltering cluster of tall trees.

In the meantime Marie Gordon had finished receiving all of

her invited guests. With a sigh of relief, and also a little anxiety, she joined them in the drawing room.

One of the first things she noticed was that her husband and Alice Procter were missing.

With her lips firmly pressed together, and a flash of indignation in her eyes, she began the program arranged for the evening. Several stars from the Chicago Grand Opera Company had been engaged. In a few minutes the room filled with lovely music.

Marie scarcely heard it. She sat watching the exits with constantly growing anxiety. She was so engrossed in her unpleasant train of thought, that she did not hear the voice speaking close to her ear.

"A penny for your thoughts, dear." It was Mrs. Hendricks repeating the words in a louder tone the second time. "Come, show a little enthusiasm. You look bored to death."

Mrs. Gordon started and gave a pathetic little smile.

"Oh, do I?" she said with a forced laugh. "But I am not bored at all. Who could be with such wonderful singing."

"And not worried either?" Mrs. Hendricks inquired in a low tone as she bent over the charming hostess. "Well, I don't blame you if you are. The moment Alice Procter saw Phil, she dragged him outside."

Marie shrugged her shoulders deprecatingly.

"No doubt she wanted my husband to show her the place," she answered. "That's logical, isn't it?"

Mrs. Hendricks swished her fan more rapidly. She was about to speak again when a young girl ran up to Marie Gordon.

"Ruth!" exclaimed the latter, undisguised disapproval in the tone. "I thought you agreed to stay out on the veranda. Don't let Phil see you in here."

The young girl quickly bent low and whispered something to her sister-in-law. The effect was terrible to behold. Marie turned white to her very lips, and she began to tremble. With a visible effort she rose, and clutched at the back of her chair for support.

"What is the matter?" Mrs. Hendricks asked. "Are you ill, Marie?"

"No—it is—only a temporary faintness," the hostess replied in broken whispers. "You look after my guests—for a little while.

I must have a breath of fresh air. I'll be—back in a moment."

Fortunately the incident remained unnoticed by nearly all of the guests. They were watching the beautiful young opera star who was just about to sing. Marie Gordon was able to leave the drawing room without attracting any attention.

"Are you sure you were not mistaken, Ruth?" she gasped as she sped with her young sister-in-law across the lawn toward the pavillion.

"I couldn't be mistaken, for I saw it with my own eyes," replied Ruth.

Chapter 15

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

BOB HARDING had not always been a good young man, for many temptations were flung in his path. There never was a time when he wanted for a charming companion. He was a great favorite with women, due chiefly to his unusual good looks and apparent utter indifference to the sex. They courted him openly. They called him on the phone and tried to make dates with him. Some were of his own station in life, some belonged to the upper social strata, and some of them already had husbands.

If Bob made mistakes, it must be charged to the inherent weakness of his sex, and inexperience, rather than the natural desire to stray from the straight and narrow road.

In analyzing his characteristics, his faults and virtues, one would arrive at the conclusion that the handsome young automobile mechanic was rather a fine chap as young men go these days. He was far above the average in a great many ways.

He had met other women before the event of Betty Procter. But he had never fallen in love. He loved her at first sight that afternoon when Alice Procter brought about their meeting.

And Bob Harding was not a fool. He realized the wide

chasm which yawned between him and Betty. And he would have tried his level best to forget her, had Betty not taken matters in her own hands and forced the issue. But after that wonderful hour on the mystic little island in Jackson Park, the die was cast.

"I'll never give you up," he told her fiercely as he kissed her goodby. "Remember that, Betty."

Betty did not want him to. She loved him better than her own life. His vocation, his humble station in life, mattered nothing. She abandoned herself happily to the pleasure of loving and being loved.

And then they were married secretly. Bob Harding did not underestimate the import of chosing for a wife this pampered and spoiled child of the idle rich. His deep, passionate love for her exalted him. It made him strong and ambitious. There was not a thing in the world he could not accomplish.

He indulged in extravagant dreams — dreams that could never come true.

Of course, Bob Harding showed bad taste when he selected a third class family hotel on State Street as a place to take his young bride. He thought the hotel thoroughly respectable, although there were those who did not agree with him.

But one thing was sure. Bob would never have taken Betty to this place had he thought otherwise. It would not have been pleasant pastime for any fool-hardy man to offer insult to his lovely wife.

One of Bob's strongest characteristics was his spirit of independence. It asserted itself when Betty suggested that they live apart for a while until she reconciled her father to their marriage.

"We'll need dad's financial help," she argued.

"We don't," was Bob's angry rejoinder. "I'll take care of you without a single penny of your father's money. Of course," he added a little ruefully, "we can not afford to live in the luxury and style in which you were raised. But you'll have plenty to eat, a roof over your head, and decent clothes to wear. And I'll be true to you, dear. I'll love you till I die."

Bob was a sincere lover. He was a delightful lover. And he was irresistible to Betty. It was very comforting to hear him say all this.

However, Betty did not give up hope of eventually winning her father over to the extent of seeing her beloved young husband established in a nice business of his own.

But that was before the fateful denouement came.

That terrible night, when Betty's hopes crashed to the earth and her father demanded that she leave the house never to return, was the most bitter that had come into her young life.

She went to Bob, and amid a shower of tears, told him what happened.

"You might have expected that, honey-girl," he told her gently. "Aristocrats like your father don't approve of having a poor automobile mechanic like me for a son-in-law. But don't you let that worry you. I'll make you so happy, you'll forget that harsh dad of yours."

"But what are we going to do?" Betty sobbed.

Bob Harding laughed.

"Do? Why, the first thing we'll do is to pull up stakes and get out of Chicago. I could stand it here, but you couldn't. I won't have you exposed to the sneers of your highbrow relatives and friends. I am afraid I'd want to kill them if they snubbed you."

Betty dried her tears and gazed lovingly at her husband.

"No, for your sake we must go to some other city," the latter went on, as he kissed her tenderly. "I can get a good job anywhere. I would like to go to Flint, Michigan. One of the largest automobile manufacturing plants is located there. I will have a chance for quick advancement and bigger wages."

The young wife wound her arms about her husband and clung to him.

"I love you, dear," she said softly, pride in her moist eyes. "I'll go with you anywhere."

"And I love you more than you'll ever know," Bob answered as he crushed Betty to his heart. "I'll work my fingers to the bone to give you all the pretty things you want. Only—only," he paused, his handsome face grave, "I hope and pray that you will never regret having married me."

"Regret it?" she cried. "Why how can you say such a thing, dear? I am happier than I ever hoped to be."

"And you'll stick to me no matter what happens, honey-

girl? You'll stick to me always—always?"

"Until death parts us, husband of mine."

It was like going over the marriage ceremony a second time. Ah, how happy these two young people were. But they were reckoning without life's stern realities, life's cruelties.

The following morning they slipped quietly out of Chicago and were headed for Flint, Michigan. As they sat side by side in the fast moving train, they were as completely happy as any young married couple could be. What mattered parental disapproval, sneering friends and the world in general? They had one another, and that was quite enough.

Of course, they made plans. And every word Bob Harding uttered marked him as a young man of absolute self-reliance and ambition.

"You must promise one thing, honey-girl," he said suddenly. "Never write to your father or your sister for money. If I were you, I wouldn't write at all. They have disowned you. Show them that you can get along without them."

"I will," Betty replied after a moment's thought. "But I shall miss dad," her lips drooped pathetically at the corners. "We were always such pals."

Bob slipped an arm around her, indifferent to the stare of amused fellow travelers.

"He was not much of a pal to you when he ordered you to leave the house like he did," he declared, his handsome face clouding. Then he went on with deep earnestness: "You must not worry about him nor any others we left back in Chicago. Some day—perhaps it won't be long, we'll return, and when we do, you shall hold your head as high as any of your wealthy friends. I may be a poor automobile mechanic now, but I am going up."

The young man spoke with conviction, and his intentions were of the best. But he was reckoning without the factor which dominates human lives—the thing called "Fate."

Three weeks had passed. The roofs and tall steeples of Flint, Michigan, stood silhouetted against the amber color of the eastern sky. The morning sun rose majestically as the mighty King of Day. The industrial section of Flint sprang into action. Here and there clouds of black smoke trailed from gigantic stacks. It was the beginning of the daily transformation.

It was the shrill blast of an accommodation train that announced the arrival of the advance guard of automobile workers which came from the suburbs and surrounding small towns.

Traction cars and privately owned machines discharged their cargo of human freight, swelling the advance guard into a mighty army.

As the clock in the tower which crowned an immense office building, struck seven-thirty, a steam siren emitted a hoarse shriek. Instantly the wheels of industry were set in motion, and bedlam broke loose.

Superintendent Carter walked briskly from his office and entered the shops. His keen eyes wandered over the busy scene, taking in everything at a glance. A cloud passed over his features when he noticed a halt in the long line of cars under construction.

"What's wrong here?" he addressed the foreman tersely. "Why aren't those cars moving?"

"One of the inspectors is not yet on the job," the foreman replied.

"What's the reason?" angrily. "You know that I won't tolerate late-coming, Moore. It is up to you to see to it that every man is punctual. The idea of one man holding up the whole works! What's his name?"

"Harding—Bob Harding," Moore answered, obviously confused.

"Is this his first offense?"

"No, sir," the foreman responded, coloring up. "Harding has been late before. I understand his wife is sick, and I——"

"That will do," the superintendent cut him short. "One excuse is about as good as another. I don't believe any of them. You know the rules of this plant, Moore. There is nothing I detest more than habitual late-coming. When this man Harding comes, send him to my office."

"Yes, sir."

Superintendent Carter passed on without again looking at the foreman, whose kindly face had grown a shade paler.

"Poor Bob," he murmured. "I am afraid he is in for it. I wish I could have prevented this. It's tough to loose out when jobs are so scarce. I might have lied to Carter, but it would have

gotten me in bad. I bet the first thing he'll do, is look up the time slips to find out how many times Harding came late this week."

Foreman Moore was right, for the superintendent was hurrying back to his office to do that very thing.

A few minutes later Bob Harding arrived. His handsome face wore a troubled look.

"Hello, Bob," the foreman greeted. "Is the missus better?"

"Not much," Harding retorted. "But she was sitting up this morning. I hope to have her on her feet in a week or two."

"Say," the foreman went on confidentially, "the boss passed by here just before you came. He hollered like a stuck pig because you were not on the job. I told him about your wife being sick, but he wants to see you in his office just the same."

Bob turned a trifle pale.

"Alright," he said, scenting trouble, and he walked quickly in the direction of the works office.

Superintendent Carter was seated at his desk. Before him lay a number of long paper ribbons taken from a time clock. A small envelope with Bob Harding's name on it was in a convenient place.

"Did you wish to see me, sir?" Bob asked respectfully.

"Yes," Carter glowered, then swung around. " You have been coming late four mornings in succession, Harding. This morning makes the fifth and last. Here is your money."

"Then—then I am discharged?" Bob faltered, taking the envelope held out to him.

"It looks that way," declared the superintendent with an ironical laugh. "You did not expect me to allow you to violate one of our strictest rules indefinitely, did you? You have gone the limit."

"But the foreman knew the reason for my coming late," Harding protested in a pitifully small voice. "My wife has been very sick the past week."

"That shouldn't affect you when plenty of trained nurses are to be had," was the unfeeling retort. "I am not at all concerned about your sick wife. Good morning—and please close the door as you go out."

Bob Harding drew himself up, and an angry flush mantled his cheeks.

"You look as if you had a frightful experience while you were out, my dear," she purred, slanting a keen glance at Mrs. Gordon's troubled face.

"Alright, Mr. Carter," he said, keeping himself under control with an effort. "If that is the way you treat your men when they are in trouble, I don't want to work for you. In my estimation you are a low-down skunk."

"Get out!" roared the superintendent, but Bob was already on his way.

Chapter 16

A MOONLIGHT KISS

WHEN PHILIP GORDON took Alice Procter alone over Oak Manor on a tour of inspection, he did so on an impulse. It was a foolish impulse as he realized before they had gone very far. Every existing condition argued against this apparent intimacy. Alice was an old sweetheart. That fact should have prevented him from committing the social error of shifting a host's responsibilities upon the slender shoulders of his wife.

Even as they walked out of the big drawing room, Philip encountered eyebrows raised questioningly, and smiles that reproached. As he wavered, he felt Miss Procter's hand pressing his arm.

"You are not weakening, are you?" she whispered.

Gordon straightened up, and with a defiant flash in his eyes he proceeded. But he was giving the astute Alice exactly the opportunity she wanted, for she had come mischief bent.

She was a woman who could be well nigh irresistible if she cared to exert her charms. Never would he forget the one and only dance he had with her—that dance and her soul-hungry, devouring eyes.

The night was wrapped in rich, delicious luxury. The moonlight shimmered in silvery ripples over the placid bosom of the lake in the park. The atmosphere was laden with the scent of flowers in full bloom.

Alice was breathing deeply and rapidly.

"What a wonderful night," she said so softly that Phil scarcely heard it. "What a perfect night for lovers."

This ought to have put Gordon on his guard, for the words were accompanied by the caressing touch of the girl's hand. But he did not turn back. He had come out to show Alice the natural beauties of his summer home, and he meant to go through with it.

Side by side they strolled on, their hands touching now and then. Conversation seemed unnecessary. They headed toward the lake.

"What was that?" Miss Procter asked in a breath and stopping abruptly.

"I didn't hear a thing," Phil declared. "Did you?"

"Yes. I am quite sure I heard footsteps back of us. Perhaps one of your guests decided that we need a chaperon." Alice uttered a short laugh. "But we don't have to be afraid of each other, do we?"

"Hardly," he responded. "I don't think anyone would have the nerve to follow us."

"You never can tell, Phil. There are plenty of social spies, and they are dangerous. Before we go any further let's make sure that we are not being followed. Really, I feel uneasy."

They retraced their steps for a considerable distance. As they paused and waited in the dead silence, their eyes met and both were smiling.

"There is no one out here besides us, Alice," he murmured and took a hold of her arm. "Come, I want to show you the most beautiful spot you ever saw. You'll say it is when you see it."

Miss Procter followed him. Presently they came to a little rustic bridge spanning a narrow arm of the lake.

It was covered with entwining honey-suckle and wild roses. At either end stood great clusters of hollyhocks, skirted by dense shrubbery. In the moonlight the scene was fantastically beautiful.

"What do you think of it?" Gordon asked.

"Oh, it is wonderful!" Alice gasped.

Gordon beamed with pleasure and pride.

"Let's cross the bridge," the girl suggested eagerly

They started and paused in the center. They stood so close that their shoulders touched. Neither spoke for a long moment. Philip Gordon's mind was occupied with thoughts of the future

and all this enchanting place would mean to him and those he loved. What a playground for his children, and what a haven of rest for his wife.

To Alice Procter it brought a new and more poignant realization of what she had missed. This handsome and successful man might have been hers. She might have—she stopped thinking and drew a sharp breath.

"How happy you must be in an Eden like this, Phil," she said softly.

"I am happy," he confessed in all frankness. "This is an ideal spot. It is so romantic and——"

"Do you find being married romantic?" the girl inquired slanting him a quick glance.

"Why not?" Gordon met her eyes. "Even married life can be romantic. Ours was the perfect union of two souls, the merging of two individualities into one perfect whole, with mutual affection and trust."

The girl grinned cynically.

"You are to be congratulated, Phil," she said. "You are no doubt still under the illusion that you found a wife who is as innocent and guileless as a baby. You still believe that Marie is like a peach from which none of the bloom has been crushed."

Gordon colored painfully. The words brought back to him the things he wanted to forget.

"Marie is still my ideal of a perfect woman," he asserted. "Of course, we have had our little misunderstandings. All married couples have them. But ours were never serious."

"Oh, your faith in your wife is boundless," said Alice ironically. "Most husbands would not have passed so lightly over an affair such as Marie had with Jack Hoover. Quite a few women of our set called him the perfect lover. I suppose they spoke from experience."

"Including yourself?" from Phil.

"No," she hastened to retort. "Hoover never impressed me very much. But to give the devil his due—he was a splendid dancer. Your wife can testify to that."

Philip Gordon began to tremble.

"Please let us not discuss Hoover," he begged. "I can't tell you how I hate him."

"You have a right to hate him," came back in a purring tone. "I know that he was desperately in love with your wife. And he was not as indifferent to her as she would have you believe. That night at the Madison Country Club dance was not the only time he——"

The gesture he made betrayed sudden anger, but his voice was quiet, yes, almost gentle.

"Alice, I would consider it a mark of your friendship for me if you'll promise never again to allude to that subject." His hand caressed her arm. "You can't imagine how distasteful it is to me."

She quickly seized the hand and held it between hers for a moment.

"I know it was rude and tactless to refer to the incident, Phil," she said tenderly as she focused her glowing eyes on his. "I gladly promise never again to speak of it to you or anyone else. I merely wanted you to be treated fair. No man will hug and kiss a woman unless he has been encouraged at least to some extent."

Gordon's lips were pressed firmly together. His face expressed forcibly subdued anger and disgust.

She knew that she had hurt him terribly, but she was not yet ready to make apologies. She watched him furtively as he walked to the end of the bridge and returned.

"Show me the wonderful garden, won't you?" she coaxed. "And the pavillion. And please don't look like that, Phil. We all have to listen to an unpleasant truth occasionally."

He nodded and they strolled across the big lawn in complete silence. Alice was effusive in her praise of the garden, but not a single word of answering comment came from the man at her side. By the time they reached the pavillion his continued silence became embarrassing.

"Phil, dear," she purred, as they stood leaning against the railing, "I am sorry if I hurt you. Won't you forgive me?"

"Why, there is nothing to forgive," he answered brightly.

"Yes, there is," the girl insisted. "I had no right to tear open an old wound. I promise you it will never happen again."

"You know, I always try to forget unpleasant things," he told her. "That affair between my wife and Hoover is one of them

I have never held her absolutely blameless. But Marie explained the matter to my entire satisfaction, and that is the end of it."

An ugly smile crossed the girl's features. Phil saw it. Then, as their eyes met, a quick change came over her. A tear glistened at her lashes.

"Phil," she murmured, obviously laboring under a powerful emotion, "I wish I could forget as easily as you can. I have tried and tried, but it is simply impossible."

He looked her over curiously, wondering what she meant.

"I—I am unhappy—dreadfully unhappy." As she said this, her voice quivered and she seemed about to break down completely.

"Come out of it, Alice," he laughed, and sized her by the shoulders. "Why should you be unhappy? You have everything a woman's heart could desire. You have wealth, good looks and a legion of friends and admirers. And you have one of the finest dads in the world."

"Yes, I have all of that," she admitted. "But I am still poor, I do not possess the one thing which makes life really worth living."

"What is that, Alice?"

"The love of an honest man, Phil. The love of a real man." She paused for a few seconds. "Once upon a time I thought I had it, but it was only a dream—a beautiful dream."

Gordon was beginning to feel rather uncomfortable.

The girl's words as well as her attitude left no room for doubt as to what she was driving at. And he felt, too, that being alone with her out there in the enchanting moonlight, was a deadly combination for mischief.

"Listen, Alice," he laughed again. "You can't make me believe now that you really cared for me. We were merely good pals."

"Pals," she said bitterly, and covered her face with her hands.

"Look here." He shook her. "That won't do at all. For Heaven's sake, don't make me feel like a——" He did not finish the sentence because quick action seemed more important than words just then. Alice Procter had suddenly begun to stagger. He caught her in his arms. "Alice—Alice!" His alarm was genuine.

"Phil—Phil!" she whispered, clinging to him in mad abandon. "Oh, Phil."

The situation had a very serious aspect. From somewhere in the immediate neighborhood came a surprised gasp. It was followed by the scampering of fleet feet.

Gordon had quickly released Alice.

She no longer staggered, but stood there raised to her full height, the pink and white silk gown, with its cascades of filmy lace bringing out every alluring line and curve of her splendid figure. She stood revealed as a woman of bewildering and compelling charm.

As his gaze traveled from the crown of her splendid hair to the tip of her satin slippers, he realized that this was not the Alice Procter he had known before his marriage.

At that time he thought her to be a jolly good companion, a sort of a frivolous social butterfly without any depth of feeling. Now he discovered under her apparently placid exterior a veritable volcano of strange emotions.

"I—I did not expect you ever to allude to the past, Alice," he said haltingly. "And to be quite frank, I never thought you really cared for me. You had so many intimate friends, so many ardent admirers, that I——"

"They meant nothing to me," the girl interrupted fiercely. "But," she added, gentle again, "I have no right to complain. I suppose the fault was all mine. I made the mistake of hiding how dearly I loved you those days, Phil. Ah, when I think of those wonderful nights we spent together."

She ended with a broken sob and gave Gordon a look that was to haunt him ever after.

"We can't recall the past," he said very tenderly. "It must remain a closed and sealed book. I am married now, and I have never regretted the step. Marie has made me happy—completely happy. I love her with all my heart and soul."

To Alice Procter this frank confession was like a dagger plunged into her bosom.

"I know that," she said, on the verge of an emotional outburst. "Just the same I want you to remember this, Phil, dear—I could never love another man, having known you so intimately. And I am not ashamed to say that I shall go on loving you to the

end of my days. Won't you try to remember that?"

He turned away and moved a few steps. She snatched a his arm, caught it, and held him back.

"Please, don't leave me." The words came in whispered pleading. "Stay just for another few minutes. This night is so beautiful. It has brought back to me all the happy moments I knew before you were married."

Gordon remained reluctantly. A long period of intense silence followed. He glanced nervously in the direction of the big house in the distance, brilliantly illuminated. From time to time sounds of sweet music came floating through the balmy atmosphere. Someone was singing.

Alice sighed and made a purposeless motion with her hand Her head was bowed, and she was quivering as with an ache.

"Don't you think we had better go back?" Phil asked softly, and a little apprehensively, too. "I am afraid you'll take cold."

"I am not cold," the girl responded. "I am burning up, Phil. Take my hand."

The touch sent a shock through him. He drew away, scenting danger. And then he caught a glimpse of her eyes. They were blazing into his. There was something in them that frightened him.

"Alice—Alice!" he cried hoarsely. "No—this won't do. For Heaven's sake, don't make a beast out of me!"

With an unexpected move, she threw her arms about his neck.

"Listen, Phil," she sobbed. "I know I can not mean anything to you now. You belong to another. You belong to those dear babies of yours. But won't you hold me to your breast just once and kiss me? It will help so much."

It was a frightful position for Gordon to be in. No disloyal thought to his wife had ever entered his mind. He was a man of honor in everything the word implied. But there seemed no escape from what was about to happen.

As he struggled to free himself, Alice Procter, her face so close to his, that he could feel her hot breath fanning his cheek. kissed him.

A low wail, like that of a heart breaking, smote upon the air. It came not from the girl's lips. Neither from Gordon's. It

came from the white figure partly hidden behind the shrubbery perhaps ten paces from the pavillion. It disappeared as noiselessly as it had come.

"Alice," Gordon said, disengaging himself from her embrace. "Don't make me regret that you were invited to come here to-night. I am not a cad. You don't want me to lose all respect for you, do you?"

She groped about blindly for a few moments, then dug her fingers into her breast over her heart. Something like a groan broke from her lips.

"Forgive me," she pleaded, her cheeks burning. "Do not despise me."

"No, I do not despise you, Alice," he said quietly. "I feel deeply sorry for you. But a thing like this must never happen again. It is unworthy of you. We want to remain friends, don't we?"

The girl nodded and broke into tears.

Chapter 17

A FATAL STEP.

THE guests who saw Marie Gordon return to the drawing room, were astounded at the change in her. She looked like a frozen lily. All the warmth seemed to have gone out of her beauty. But there was no change in her manner of playing the hostess. She was charming as always as she spoke a word here or bestowed a smile there. A close observer, however, would have noticed a light in her eyes that was hard to define. It was a strange sort of gleam which came and went.

Mrs. Hendricks followed Marie like a shadow. This gossip was burning with curiosity. She was determined to find out why the latter had left the drawing room in such haste.

"You look as if you had a frightful experience while you were out, my dear," she purred, slanting a keen glance at Mrs. Gordon's troubled face. "Would you mind telling me what happened?"

Marie met the glance without moving an eyelash.

"Not at all," she said, her voice under perfect control. "Something went wrong in the nursery. The children needed my attention quite suddenly."

"Oh," sighed Mrs. Hendricks, obviously disappointed and frankly incredulous. "What a relief to hear such an explanation. Really, I was very much afraid that Alice Procter——"

"Of course you would think that," Marie broke in with a vehemence which betrayed what was going on in her torn and bleeding heart. "But you are mistaken as usual. Miss Procter is on her good behavior to-night. And besides, I can trust my husband with any woman. A comfortable feeling, isn't it, Louise?"

"It must be," the latter drawled insolently, "although I have never experienced it. All married men fancy they missed something when they see an old sweetheart, especially if the girl is as beautiful as Alice Procter."

Marie's only answer was a look of withering contempt, then she turned her back deliberately upon the speaker and mingled with the other guests. Not a single one of them had the slightest inkling of the terrible struggle waging in the soul of the charming

hostess.

Only a woman with strength of character could do what Marie Gordon was doing now. The average wife who caught her husband with another woman in his arms, would have lost her head and created a scene.

But Marie could not be classed as an average woman.

At this particular moment she was determined to shield her husband against calumny even though he had damned himself forever in her sight.

All through the evening she played the hostess in faultless style. When Phil returned to the drawing room with Alice Procter, she turned a shade paler, but that was all.

There was absolutely nothing in her conduct toward her husband which might have led any of the guests to suspect what had taken place out there in the pavillion. She was even pleasant to Alice—the guilty woman.

However, the strain was beginning to tell on Marie Gordon. It took every ounce of her strength and all of her willpower to go through that night. Occasionally her lips would droop pathetically at the corners, but a hastily summoned smile supplanted that inclination to cry.

Once she found herself alone with Alice Procter for a moment.

"I congratulate you, my dear," the latter murmured, touching Marie with her fan. "What an ideal summer home. Phil showed me several wonderful spots. I was amazed."

"Were you?" Marie raised her brows and a cold smile hovered about her sensitive mouth.

"Yes," said Alice. "And your husband was kind enough to invite me to spend a few weeks here. But I don't think I can this summer. I am planning to go abroad."

"Are you?" Marie's cold smile was still in evidence. "Well, if you go, I suggest that you spend some time in England. You'll find some wonderful pavillions at some of the country homes. They are particularly enticing on moonlight nights."

Alice Procter's cheeks turned crimson. When she finally recovered from her confusion, Marie Gordon stood at the other end of the drawing room engaged in a spirited conversation with two gentlemen.

She looked about for Phil, but he, too, seemed to have found the company of others more to his liking. She colored hotly, guiltily, then moved toward the door. There was no one to detain Alice when she asked one of the servants to call her car.

A feeling of rage possessed her as she drove homeward. She had made a fool of herself without gaining anything.

"I never want to see that place again!" she muttered fiercely.

But the fates already had decreed otherwise. Ah, if Alice Procter could have looked into the future! She would have been tremendously surprised and tremendously pleased.

In the meantime the party was drawing to a close. It was a good thing for Marie Gordon, for she could not have held on much longer. Once she thought she was going to faint. She rushed from the drawing room to find a few moments of rest and solitude in her boudoir.

A convulsive sob broke from her lips as she fell limply into a chair.

How tenderly and trustfully she had loved Philip. He and the children had been all the world to her—and now the end had come. Yes, the end had come indeed, for she had been betrayed by the man into whose hands she had given her very life.

Vainly she tried to imagine that it was all a horrible dream—a vivid trick of her imagination. But the frightful scene she had witnessed with her own eyes, was ever before her.

She had seen her husband crush Alice Procter to his bosom. He had kissed her, she felt sure of that.

Why had she not heeded the many warnings that were whispered to her again and again? Why had she remained blind to the many little scenes staged for her with malicious intentions?

Slowly a desperate resolve took root in her maddened brain. To live with Phil after this, was utterly out of the question. That he loved Alice Procter was undeniable.

"I'll leave him!" she muttered, her voice strangling in her throat. "I'll leave him this very night!"

Marie Gordon was not a naturally impulsive woman. But she was not herself now. There was but one more duty to be performed. She must recall that smile to her face and say goodby to her guests. They must not suspect that a tragedy had come into her life this night.

"That should not affect you when plenty of trained nurses are to be had," was the unfeeling retort. "I am no at all concerned about your sick wife. Good morning — and please close the door as you go out."

She pulled herself together and left the boudoir, her feet dragging, her heart pounding, and her head bowed.

At the top of the stairs she paused before descending. The hall below was already crowded with people ready to leave. How Marie had the courage to say pleasant things to them in parting, she never knew. But she did it.

Directly behind her stood Phil. She heard his mellow voice as he uttered a laugh. It cut her to the very soul.

"Come back, all of you!" she heard him shout. "Oak Manor is always ready to welcome you when the days get hot in the city. If I am not at home, my wife will make you comfortable."

Marie barely waited until the last guest drove away. She ran up the stairs as if pursued by a thousand furies. Phil stared after her and shook his head. Only too well did he know the reason for her leaving him in such an abrupt manner.

"I made a mistake in taking Alice through the grounds alone," he admitted to himself. "I might have known that Marie wouldn't like it. Oh, well, I'll explain to-morrow."

Little did he dream that there would be no to-morrow between him and his wife.

From somewhere in the western horizon came the rumbling of thunder. With incredible swiftness black clouds overspread the sky. A vicious flash of yellow lightning came as a warning that the storm had arrived. Peal after peal of crashing thunder followed.

Philip went to his room and opened the window. A sudden violent gust of wind caused him to close it again. He did not undress, but sat down and lit a cigar.

Marie had gone to the nursery. Both of the children were awake. Annie was with them.

"Mrs. Gordon!' the girl exclaimed when she saw her mistress. "What has happened? You look like a ghost!"

"Annie," came back in a strangely quiet but determined tone. "I am leaving this house to-night. Promise me that you will stay with my babies. Stay with them always, no matter what happens to me."

"You—you can't mean it?" the girl breathed, trembling with alarm.

"Yes, I do,' Marie replied hopelessly. "I don't know how long I'll be gone, but go I must. And you must be a mother to my

dear babies. You will, won't you, Annie? Please promise me."

Annie promised, trying vainly to keep back the tears.

"But—but why must you go?" she ventured timidly.

"I—I couldn't tell you now," the unhappy mistress wailed. "I could not go all over that again and describe it in words. Perhaps when I get back, I will tell you everything. Now help me change clothes. Get my traveling dress and bring it to my boudoir."

While the girl hurried away, Marie stood there, trying hard to steel herself for the ordeal to come. A stifled sob slipped over her lips as she approached the two white beds.

The boy stared up at her, his big eyes filled with grave concern.

"Muvver," he said, raising himself to a sitting posture. "You told nursie you were going away. But you mustn't. See how it lightens. I am afraid. Please stay with me and Phyllis."

The heartbroken mother could scarcely refrain from crying out aloud. With frantic grief she pressed little Harry to her bosom.

"You must be a brave boy," she murmured, choking back the tears. "Perhaps I won't be gone long. Annie will stay with you and sister. You must not mind the lightning and thunder. That is God's way of scolding the people who are bad."

"Is daddy going with you?" the boy asked.

"No," she replied with a groan of anguish. "I am going alone."

"Then take me with you," Harry went on in a pleading tone. "I want to go with you, muvver."

"Me, too," little Phyllis begged.

Sinking down upon her knees, Marie clasped her baby girl in her arms and buried her hot face in the coverlet to hide the tears. Oh, God, how could she leave those two sweet, dependent children?

She was fast losing her self-control. The girl's arms were tightly wound about her neck. The boy had left his own bed, and knelt beside his mother in an attitude of prayer. Marie did not notice him until he tugged at her sleeve.

"Muvver, you are crying," he said, struggling to his feet. "Will you smile if I kiss you?"

And Marie did smile — a piteous smile — a heartbreaking smile. Her resolve began to weaken. What mattered it if Phil did

not love her any longer? What difference did it make if he chose Alice Procter as the object of his affection? Did she not have the love of these tender children?

But crowded upon these thoughts came others more unpleasant. Philip had made love to Alice in the pavillion. She had caught him at it. How often had he done this same thing before? And what assurance had she that he would not repeat it?

Already the gossips had busied themselves coupling the name of Alice Procter, with Phil's. Marie would rather have died than be compelled to play the role of a discarded woman—an unloved wife.

"No—no!" she gasped, new determination seizing her. "I could not stand it. I'll go to my aunt and stay there. And I'll never come back to him unless he breaks with Alice. If he don't come after me, I'll know that every thing is indeed over between us."

Then came another thought — a thought which made her wince as it occurred to her. What if Phil ignored her and started divorce proceedings? If she left him she gave him sufficient grounds. Marie's teeth closed with a snap.

"Let him!" she panted as she hugged both of her children close. "I'll fight for what is mine. He can have Alice Procter, but not these two little tots. They are mine—mine!"

And coldly determined to go through with her mad plan, she grew quite calm. She picked up the boy and put him in his own bed. How she managed to quiet him and her baby girl, she hardly knew. But she succeeded in coaxing them both back to sleep, and stole from the room.

In her boudoir, Annie was busy packing a traveling bag. Marie sat down at her inlaid mahogany desk and hurriedly wrote the following lines:

"Phil:

"I don't think it at all necessary to tell you why I am leaving. Your own conscience ought to tell you the reason. I could not remain under the same roof with you and retain my self-respect. My leaving your home will give you the doubtlessly desired grounds for a divorce. I shall not contest the suit.

"Of course, after what happened to-night, you can

scarcely claim to be the proper person to have charge of our children. I shall fight for them with every means at my command. They are my only consolation in my misery. For the sake of the love you once bore me, do not attempt to take them away from me."

Marie."

She folded the letter, placed it in an envelope, sealed it, and handed it to Annie.

"See to it that Mr. Gordon gets this as soon as he arises in the morning," she said to the girl. "Now help me dress. I only have thirty-five minutes to get my train at the Twelfth Street Station."

"Where are you going?" Annie ventured in a trembling voice.

"To Cincinnati," the mistress answered. "I expect to spend some time with an aunt of mine."

"But you'll come back soon; won't you?" The girl's lips quivered.

"I—I hope to," Marie said, and put a hand on Annie's shoulder. "But whether I come back or not, you must not forsake my babies. I will write to you as soon as I reach my destination. Keep me fully informed as to——"

A heavy step was heard in the corridor. Marie recognized it at once. In a flash she was at the door and turned the key in the lock.

Then came a knock.

"Marie." It was Phil's voice. "I want to talk to you. Can I come in?"

She was in a dreadful quandary. She could not have faced her husband just now for anything in the world.

"Marie," he called again. "Are you asleep?"

When no answer came, he evidently took it for granted that his wife had retired and did not wish to be disturbed. With her hands pressed to her heart, Marie listened to his receding footsteps. A door was closed on the other side of the corridor, and all was silence.

An affecting scene took place when the two women parted, Annie was in tears, while Marie bore up bravely. There was an

exchange of a few whispered words, a hug and a sob, and a shadowy figure slipped out into the hall and disappeared down the stairs.

Chapter 13

DEEPENING SHADOWS

LOOSING his job at this particular time was nothing short of a tragedy to Bob Harding. There were others to be had, but he was not at all sure about that. The automobile manufacturing industry was in a slump. Men were being laid off or discharged for the least infraction of any of the rules. Bob's anger got the best of him when he was summarily dismissed for what seemed a trifling offense. He had never been discharged before, for he was an exceptionally good mechanic and very conscientious.

As he made his way homeward, he reflected bitterly upon the unsympathetic treatment received at the hands of Superintendent Carter, who had ordered him to leave in such harsh terms. And he reflected, too, upon the conditions which had indirectly been responsible for his wife's illness.

He realized with a pang of keen remorse, the folly of transplanting a tenderly reared hothouse flower like Betty from a life of luxurious ease to the drudgery of a poor man's wife.

But she had borne up under it bravely because she loved him. Not a single reproach had ever passed her lips. Deprivations and constant self-denial had not soured her sweet disposition. She had clung to him with gentle words of encouragement when he bewailed the fact that he could not give her all the comforts of a modern home.

Even when her health gave way, and she lay without the attention of a trained nurse, because they could not afford one, she had never lost her smile.

Bob Harding loved his pretty young wife with a devotion that was pathetic. That's why his heart grew heavy as lead within him as he approached the extremely modest little home after having

been discharged. He feared the news would aggravate Betty's condition and cause a set-back.

Betty was seated in an armchair at the window and gazed dreamily at the distant landscapes, when she saw her husband come home. He was dragging his feet and he did not hold his head so proudly erect as usual.

She surmised instantly that something out of the ordinary had happened. She could hardly wait until he entered the room.

Bob came in and threw his cap on a chair with a gesture of disgust. He faced his young wife like a boy waiting to be spanked. He had carefully rehearsed just what he wanted to say, but he had difficulty in finding his voice.

It was Betty who spoke first.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Why are you home at this hour?"

He swallowed hard several times, then managed to stammer:

"I—I was discharged for—for coming late.

"Discharged, Bob?" Her voice held pained surprise.

"Yes, discharged," he reiterated, then added: "I did not mind that so much if it had been done decently and for a good reason."

Betty heard only the word "discharged." It was droning in her ears like the oncoming rush of a devastating flood. She stared at her husband with a look of blank dismay in her lovely eyes.

"Discharged?" she repeated at last. "Oh, that is terrible. What will become of us now?"

Instantly Bob's attitude changed. His handsome face brightened.

"Don't you worry about that, sweetheart," he said, taking the frail figure in his arms. "I'll get another job within twenty-four hours."

"Oh, I hope so," Betty breathed. "It is too bad you had to lose your position now, when we need a steady income so much. There is a doctor bill to be paid, and we owe the corner druggist for quite a bit of medicine."

Bob, his happy, careless self again, uttered a laugh.

"You just leave that to me, honey-pet," he cried. "You must not worry your head for a moment about these bills. They will be paid. I am going out and look for another job this afternoon, and

I have a hunch that I'll land something better than I had."

In spite of her apparent weakness a wave of color suffused Betty's thin face. Her lashes, quivering, drooped, her lips trembled with a spasm half of smiles, half of tears.

Thus she lay in her husband's arms, listening to his encouragement as he painted a word picture of a happier and more prosperous future.

The shadows on her white brow were still hanging on with unusual tenacity, but, these, too, disappeared at last. She gazed up at him with a world of love and tender solicitude in her eyes.

"I wish you would let me write to my father," she said after a pause. "I know he would help us."

Bob's face hardened, then relaxed.

"Betty," he said, forcing her chin up and kissing her sweet mouth. "To write to your father for financial help would be an admission on your part that you married a man who can not take care of you properly. It would imply that——"

She stopped him with a return kiss.

"I wish you would not be so sensitive about this, dear." She stroked his curly dark hair. "You know, half of dad's fortune will be mine anyway some day. I don't want to wound your pride, really. I don't. Just think what a few hundred dollars in ready cash would mean to us now."

"Please—please," he begged. "If you have the least love for me, don't even think of writing to your father for money. You dont want to humiliate me like that, do you?"

Betty drew his head down and petted his cheeks.

"I love you more than my life, you dear, dear boy," she murmured. "I would not humiliate you or hurt you for anything in the world. Alright, I won't write to dad. We'll fight it out alone."

"That's spoke like a brave, true pal," he commended heartily, and giving her a hug. "We'll fight it out together—just you and I."

A happy smile illuminated her features.

"I feel so much better this morning, dear," she declared. "While you were away, I had a nice stroll about the room all by myself." When she saw the incredulous look on his face, she added hastily: "If you don't believe it, I'll show you."

She rose from the chair and walked across the room and back again. The effort made her feel faint for a moment, but she was game.

"You see, I'll be perfectly well in a few days," she told him. "But," and a roguish twinkle came into her eyes, "I'll be sorry. It was so nice to have a big man like you care for me as if I were a helpless baby. You were so gentle and so patient. I shall miss all those little attentions."

Bob stuck out his chest and laughed.

"Oh, yes," he exclaimed, "if the worst happens, I might get a job as a nurse. Of course, I'd want to chose my patients. No disagreeable old men and women for me. I'd want young girls—chickens, and pretty ones."

Betty made a grimace.

"You confine your activities to this chicken," she answered. "And if you talk like that again, I'll get worse again. I'll get real sick and die?"

"If you do, I'll spank you," her husband threatened humorously. "What will become of me if you leave me alone in this cruel world? Why, Id be so miserable I'd want to die, too."

Then their lips met in another kiss, and both laughed.

They chatted like two happy children until noon. After lunch, Bob set out in search for another job. He entered the employment office of a large automobile manufacturing plant in high hopes. The man in charge greeted him pleasantly.

Yes, they had a position open if Bob could qualify for it. He convinced the employment manager in a few minutes that he possessed the required knowledge and mechanical skill.

Then came the inevitable question: "Where did you work last?"

Bob Harding answered.

"Why did you leave there?" The second inevitable question.

Bob explained, telling the absolute truth. His voice trembled a little as he spoke about his wife's illness being responsible for arriving at his post late several mornings in succession. But he did not say that he had called Superintendent Carter "a low-down skunk."

The employment manager listened quietly. When Bob finished, he excused himself and went into an adjoining office to use

the telephone. He got the applicant's last place of employment on the line. Carter answered.

What the latter said was short and to the point.

The result was that Bob Harding was told that an error had been made and that the position discussed had already been filled that morning.

"We'll be glad to let you hear from us when we need a man of your caliber," were the employment manager's final words. "Good day."

Bob was disappointed, and puzzled, too. There was a nigger in the woodpile somewhere. Nothing daunted, however, he went to the next plant. His experience there was the same. Then he lost his patience and demanded to know the real reason why he was being turned down. His already well-defined suspicion must be satisfied.

"You do not come well recommended," was the reply he received. "Mr. Carter tells me that you——"

"So Carter is trying to queer me?" Bob broke in angrily. "Alright, I guess it wouldn't hurt to have a talk with him. He can't keep me out of a job and do it fairly."

With this he fled and ran down the street, his anger rising until he could scarcely control it. His first impulse was to go to Carter's office and call him to account. But there were still a few other plants he had not visited. Perhaps he would have better luck in one of them.

He decided to do that the following day and returned home in a disagreeable frame of mind.

It was an easy task for Betty to coax him out of his ill humor. In less than thirty minutes he seemed to have changed completely. Only his square jaw stuck out with a little more determination.

The following day Bob faced new disappointments. It appeared to be useless to try for another job in Flint. He thought about going to Detroit, but that was out of the question for the present. Betty was not yet strong enough to stand even a short railroad trip.

But that was not the only reason why Bob Harding tarried.

He was fiercely determined to get even with Superintendent Carter, for the latter was keeping him out of a job unfairly.

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